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Anarchism and the
Cuban Workers'
Movement
1860s - 1960s

Michael Schmidt

A South African Anarchist Pamphlet



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THE EARLY CUBAN ANARCHIST MOVEMENT

Sadly, the red-fascist Cuban dictatorship is upheld today as a shining light for a confused Left in troubled post-communist times. But there is another tradition hidden in the shadows cast by the monolithic state-capitalism of Cuba's wealthy and fanatical "Maximum Leader": a true worker's revolutionary tradition; a 100-year struggle for freedom. Cuba can proudly claim the most consistent, longest and unbroken (until 1963) mass anarchist tradition among its workers and peasantry, with decades of substantial trade union dominance, and battle honours against Spanish and American imperialism, as well as against indigenous dictatorship, whether capitalist or so-called communist. Its ground-breaking activism against slavery, racist and gender discrimination, the right-wing alliances of the communists and, much later, the anti-working class, protectionist-capitalist Castro regime, must put it at the forefront of any history of anarchism. Anarchist ideas first entered Cuba with the formation of an anarchist society in 1857 and the publication from 1865 of the anarcho-mutualist weekly newspaper *La Aurora* (The Dawn).

In 1868, a 10-year guerrilla war for independence from colonial Spain ensued. Spain responded by sending General Valeriano Weyler, "The Butcher", to Cuba. He established concentration camps and some 52,000 people were killed in Havana alone. Some 200,000 militants gave their lives in this struggle. The Cubans responded by torching the vast sugar estates and Weyler was recalled to Spain in 1879. The influence of the Spanish anarcho-collectivist FRE, the Spanish section of the First International, and its later incarnation in 1881 as the FTRE, the Spanish section of the Black International, was vital. A key figure was a Creole sugar worker turned cigar maker Enrique Roig San Martin (1843-1889), who became an anarchist in 1882 and who launched an attack on reformism in his own anarchist paper, *El Productor* (The Producer), calling for the establishment of a FRE-like organisation. This occurred in 1883 with the founding of the anarcho-collectivist *Artisans' Central Council* (JCA) in Havana.

At the time it was illegal in Cuba for workers to form associations to change their working conditions and the JCA was forced to operate underground until 1885. At the same time, Roig and others founded the anarcho-communist *Workers' Alliance* (AO) that operated in Cuba as well as in the expatriate Cuban tobacco workers in Key West and Tampa, Florida, USA. Also in 1883, *Cuban Ubiquitous Nihilism* (NUC), a nihilist organisation, influenced by terrorism in Russia, and aimed at the inde-

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the Cuban workers had won in 80 years of struggle were eliminated. Castro, and Guevara in particular, through the vehicle of their vicious new secret police, the C-2, purged anarcho-syndicalists from the communist-dominated unions and suppressed anarchist publications. This repression was soon extended to other revolutionary factions: the CGT, ALC, OR, FEU, Spanish exile CNT, the *Libertarian Syndicalist Group* (GSL) and the Trotskyists. Anarchists and other anti-Batista, anti-Castroite revolutionaries including anti-Stalinist CTCR leaders were either jailed, tortured or shot or went underground or into exile. Clandestine anarchists who remained in Cuba formed the rank-and-file *Movement for Trade Union Action* (MAS) which had as its paper *Nuestra Pabla Semanal* (Our Weekly Message).

Cuba became a totalitarian oligarchy, a military dictatorship and a state-capitalist fiefdom for the personal enrichment of Castro and his clique. In 1961, some Cuban exiles formed the *Libertarian Movement of Cuba in Exile* (MLCE) in the USA that maintained ties with the underground militants of the ALC, CGT and MAS in Cuba.

By 1966, according to Sam Dolgoff's *The Cuban Revolution: a Critical Perspective*, fascist Spain had become "communist" Cuba's biggest trading partner. In 1964, a law was passed that forced all Cuban workers to carry a "labour identity card" that recorded their slavish dedication to work and their political subservience. The following year, the PURS renamed itself the *Communist Party of Cuba* (CPC).

pendence of Cuba was formed. In 1885, the JCA transformed into the *Labourer's Circle* (CT), an anarcho-collectivist federation of cigar-makers, printers and tailors, with *El Artesano* (The Artisan) as its mouthpiece in Havana and *El Hijo del Pueblo* (Son of the People) in the city of Manzanillo. The CT was staunchly anti-racist, anti-imperialist, anti-nationalist and demanded that workers be "removed from the cancer of politics".

By 1889, it started six schools, teaching 600 boys and 200 girls of all "races". By 1886, influenced by news of the execution of the Haymarket martyrs, the Cubans involved in the pro-independence movement had become increasingly converted to anarchism. In the same year, there was a three-month strike in the Partido tobacco factories in Havana, but a subsequent lockout that ended in defeat for the tobacco workers destroyed the reformist union and opened the way for the anarchists to form the anarcho-syndicalist *Tobacco Workers' Federation* (FOT).

In 1891, the Spanish anarchist journalist Jose Campos started an anti-imperialist Cuban newspaper, *El Despertar* (The Desperate) in New York City where there was a strong Cuban expatriate community. The following year, the first regional anarchist congress was held, but the authorities intervened, outlawed the AO, banned the anarchist press, and jailed or deported the key figures. The CT was also shut down in the early 1890s due to repression, which included the 1893 anti-anarchist law, but anarchists still controlled the *Cuban Labour Confederation* (CTC) set up in that decade.

By the time the war of independence broke out in 1895, the anarchists were at the forefront of the struggle and many including the rebel army leader Armando André gave their lives. The war, during which the oppressive Spanish Prime Minister Antonio Canovas del Castillo was assassinated by the anarchist Michel Angiolillo, ended in defeat for Spain and much of its empire in 1898, but US forces occupied the island between 1898 and 1902. They only withdrew, granting Cuba nominal status as an "independent" republic, after they had secured the right to intervene in Cuban affairs and permanently occupy the naval base of Guantanamo Bay. Cuba became a de facto US satellite. The new Cuban ruling class was corrupt and cleaned out the treasury.

THE MATURE CUBAN ANARCHIST MOVEMENT

In 1900, the Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta was invited to Cuba, but he was deported by the regime. In 1902, anarchists organised the first general strike under the republic, but the authorities slaughtered 20 strikers. The most important strikes in the period were all lead by anarchists: the 1903 sugar strike and the Moneda general strike; the 1907 railway, tobacco, maritime and construction workers strikes; the

1910 sewer workers strike; the 1912 restaurant and cafe workers strike; and the violent Havana tunnel workers strike. As a result of this militancy, and despite the severity of government repression, including the deportation of agitators, the anarchist movement grew to about 200,000 and organised producers' and consumers' housing and other co-operatives. The most influential anarchist journals at this time were the weekly *Tierra!* (Land!), *El Ideal* (The Ideal) and *El Mundo Ideal* (The Ideal World).

Influenced by the Mexican Revolution 1910-1922, anarchist labour militancy grew, particularly in the sugar plantations where the first *Cuban Peasant Federation* (FCC) was formed in 1915. Cuban anarchists were the only militants in the sugar industry until about 1925. In 1918, a bloody strike in Havana against the high cost of living saw strikers fired on by police. Despite this extermination campaign being mounted against the anarchists by the puppet leader President Garcia Menocal and his successors, the anarchist press was highly visible, with titles like *Voz Rebelde* (Rebel Voice), *La Batalla* (The Battle), *Via Libre* (Free Road), *Solidaridad* (Solidarity), *El Boletín Tabacalero* (Tobacco Workers' Bulletin), *Memorandum Tipografico* (Typographical Memorandum) and *Tierra!*.

As a result of initial enthusiasm for the Bolsheviks following the Russian Revolution 1917-1921, a minority of Cuban anarchists came out in favour of joining the new *Communist International* (CI) and a tiny 10-member communist *People's Socialist Party* (PSP) was founded in 1925. But a national anarchist congress in 1920 laid the groundwork for a united opposition to Bolshevism. In 1922, the anarcho-syndicalists started the Labour Federation of Havana, and formed workers' centres, libertarian schools and a people's university, the José Martí Popular University. Also in 1922, the anarchist printer Alfredo Lopez formed the anarcho-syndicalist *Havana Labour Federation* (FOH).

The CTC came under communist control after the Russian Revolution but later faded away due to a combination of repression and the dominance of anarchism in the labour movement. In 1924, another national anarchist congress founded the *Federation of Anarchist Groups of Cuba* (FGAC), which drew together the anarcho-syndicalist, anarcho-communist and other anarchist strains into one organisation that consolidated all its scattered journals under the aegis of *Tierra!* that attained a wide circulation and continued publication until the late 1930s. When the anarchist *Cuban Workers' National Confederation* (CNOC) was formed in 1925, following three labour congresses, it represented 128 collectives and more than 200,000 workers. Although it included socialists and communists, its statutes declared "the total and collective rejection of electoral action". As a result, CNOC militants were murdered by the US-backed regime of President Gerardo Machado 1925-1933. The communist PSP was briefly outlawed in 1927. Other anarchist-controlled unions in this period were the powerful *Brewery Industrial Union* (SIF) and the industrial and peasant *General Union of Labour of San Cristobal* (SGTSC), but all anarchist unions were forced underground when Machado set up the state-controlled *United National Federation of Labour* (UFON) to which all legal unions were forced to belong.

By 1931, the clandestine CNOC had fallen under communist influence, so former

As soon as Castro was installed in power, he unilaterally disbanded the DR, the *Second Escambray Front* and the *Civic Resistance Movement* (MRC) by a two-pronged process of repression and appeasement - because they were the most powerful challengers to his new power base. The make-up of Castro's first cabinet reveals not a single working-class member: seven lawyers, two university professors, three university students, a doctor, an engineer, an architect, a mayor and a captain.

As a result of Castro's obvious class bias, the Catholic Church hierarchy and the ruling class became enthusiastic supporters and funders of his bogus "revolution", although many rank-and-file Catholics and priests had fought against Batista. Castro, a Cuban nationalist, only started singing the "communist" tune when the US stopped buying Cuban sugar in 1961 because of his conflict with US property owners on the island, and Russia and China started buying the sugar. Under the influence of Guevara and Raul Castro, the ruling elite was expanded into the *United Party of the Socialist Revolution* (PURS) that included militants of the MJ26, co-opted elements of the disbanded DR and finally the communist PSP. The party - renamed the *Communist Party of Cuba* (CPC) in 1965 - was later purged and leading MJ26 members like Matos were jailed while others like Castro's second-in-command, Camilo Cienfuegos, and commander Plinio Orieto were killed. But staunch former Batista supporters like Blas, Rodriguez, Osvaldo Torrado, Juan Marinello and Lazaro Peña became part of Castro's inner circle. Guevara, once the MJ26's chief executioner, now became supreme prosecutor in the summary trials of Batista supporters, 550 of whom were shot in the first few months. Castro, who demanded he be called "Maximum Leader", developed a personality cult around himself through indoctrination in the schools, the media and the cinema - all regimented and controlled by the state.

Pro-Castro vigilante groups called the *Committees for the Defence of the Revolution* (CDR) were formed as a supposedly popular civil organisation, but whose task was spying on the civilians so the Castroite regime could rule by fear.

The PURS militarised the entire Cuban society, forming youth brigades and labour battalions that "voluntarily" worked themselves to death for no increase in pay, yet still production in what had during the insurgency been a country with a higher per capita income than Japan went into a tailspin. On the eve of the revolution, the CTC2 had a membership of 1.2-million, organised into 33 industrial federations, which in 1959, Castro subordinated to his party. Following in the footsteps of the Peronist fascists, the dictatorship corporatised the CTC2 into the Revolutionary *Cuban Confederation of Labour* (CTCR), despite the fact that of 2,963 delegates at the 1959 congress, only 247 voted for Castro's programme.

The Peronist nature of Castroism is demonstrated by the fact that when the Argentine fascist and former dictator Juan Peron died in 1974, Castro proclaimed three days of national mourning. In a speech that echoed Mussolini, Raul Castro told the CTCR workers that: "The best union is the state. The workers don't need unions when they have a friendly government, their government, to protect them." The right to strike, job security, sick leave, paid holidays and other improvements that

PSP was viewed with deep suspicion by the insurrectionaries including those of the MJ26. But Stalinists like Ché Guevara and Castro's brother Raul Castro tried to unite the MJ26 with the communists, initially unsuccessfully.

Before Fidel Castro, Guevara and 80 MJ26 guerrillas landed on the beaches of Cuba from Mexico in 1956, MJ26 guerrillas under Frank Pais took the city of Santiago de Cuba, but they later lost it. Only 20 of Castro's unit managed to escape into the Sierra Maestra Mountains where they remained isolated and largely ineffective. Many other guerrilla groups operated in the mountains, including the *Student Directorate* (DE), but the cities were the most important field of battle.

On September 5, 1957, navy mutineers and civilian insurrectionaries captured the Cayo Loco Naval Base at Cienfuegos and they distributed weapons to the populace, but the uprising, which was supposed to coincide with one in Havana which failed to materialise, was crushed by the army and air force. But the insurrection became entrenched and the DR opened up a second front in the Escambray Mountains, besieged Cienfuegos and seized the town and naval base in 1958. By June 1958, Castro's MJ26 "army" in the Sierra Maestra consisted only of 300 men, rising to a mere 800 in August.

THE CASTROIST COUNTER-REVOLUTION - 1959

In the closing weeks of 1958, while other rebel forces advanced in Las Villas province, Castro struck a secret deal with General Cantillo, who was in charge of Oriente province. Cantillo, who wanted Batista ousted, agreed to surrender the city of Santiago de Cuba and the province to the control of the MJ26 forces under Huber Matos. Batista, by then beset on all sides, but unaware of this deal, summoned Cantillo and arranged to hand over control of the whole of Cuba to his general who immediately informed his secret new ally. On January 1, 1959, Batista and his entourage fled Cuba. The DR and its allied guerrillas from the Second Escambray Front, armed with 500 rifles, 5 machine guns and tanks taken from the arsenal near Havana, occupied the University of Havana and the Presidential Palace. Castro announced to general disgust and amusement his own "provisional government" in Santiago de Cuba, but the DR guerrillas scoffed at him and refused the MJ26 access to the Presidential Palace. But because Cantillo surrendered the 40,000-strong armed forces to Castro without a shot being fired, as per their pact, the tiny 1,500-man MJ26 was able to install its commanders like Guevara immediately in key army posts and military bases. Only once his forces were in place and there was no threat to his person did Castro, like Mussolini before him, stage his fake march on the capital, Havana, on January 8, supported by "captured" army tanks, a spectacle for the war-weary citizenry and the foreign media.

CNOC anarchist militants established the independent underground anarcho-syndicalist *General Confederation of Labour* (CGT). The CGT, FGAC and the CNOC organised strikes including the general strike of 1933 that felled the Machado dictatorship, which had murdered, jailed and deported countless key anarchist militants. In a last-ditch attempt to stay in power, Machado signed a pact with the PSP and the communist-controlled CNOC, but it failed to crush the uprising and Machado was ousted. The US-backed Carlos Manuel de Cespedes replaced Machado, but only lasted 21 days until ousted in turn by a junta lead by an army sergeant, Fulgencio Batista, which instituted a number of constitutional reforms, including a repeal of the law that allowed the US to intervene in Cuba. In 1936, Cuban anarchists formed a section of *International Anti-fascist Solidarity* (SIA) to support the Spanish workers and peasants in their revolution. Following the defeat of the revolution in 1939, numerous Spanish anarchist exiles established an exile CNT organisation in Cuba and threw themselves into labour organising in their new homeland.

In 1938, another union bearing the proud historical name *Cuban Confederation of Labour* (CTC2) was founded, but unlike its predecessor, it was a corporatist, state-controlled union along the lines of the earlier UFON. In 1939, the anarchists reformed the FGAC as the anarcho-communist *Libertarian Association of Cuba* (ALC) and they also set up the *Libertarian Youth* (JL) as well as peasant collectives, especially among coffee workers. The Cuban anarchist movement remained a crucial player in the labour movement. In 1940, the PSP was Stalinised by the Comintern and later that year, in exchange for its support for Batista's junta, the PSP was allowed to take control of the CTC2.

ANARCHIST ANTI-RACISM & ANTI-IMPERIALISM

The anarchists won over the Cuban labour movement from the mid-1880s and dominated it well into the 1950s. They led massive strikes and were active in the anti-colonial struggle against Spain. The Cuban anarchists united people of African, European and mixed decent in mass trade unions. They united the workers in the struggle against the bosses and against all oppression. The anarchists led struggles against the legacy of slavery in Cuba, which included racial discrimination and the physical punishment of apprentices. The historian Joan Casanovas has said that the anarchist-led Cuban labour movement undertook "the mass mobilisation of people of diverse race and ethnicity", going on to write that the Cuban anarchists opposed racial segregation, the colour bar (jobs reserved for whites) and the physical punishment of non-white apprentices. The anarchist *Labourers' Circle* (CT) that was established in Havana in 1885 was the first actively anti-racist workers' organisation in Cuba, stating that it was important to propagate among the working class "the idea

that labour does not have race, nor nationality, nor hierarchy". The CT went on to form the first "mixed-race" schools for Cuban workers' children of diverse origins.

The anarchist movement took up the challenge. In Cuba, the anarchists had a massive working class base, and had political leadership in the trade unions. They were also active in the struggle for independence from Spain. They fought in the Ten-Year War (1868-1878). In 1885, the anarchist theorist and agitator Enrique Roig de San Martín founded the newspaper *El Productor* (The Producer) which was used to organise strikes. An anarchist Workers' Alliance was formed and was especially strong among tobacco workers. Anarchists became involved in the revolutionary societies-in-exile in Florida, USA, which were opposed to Spanish control of Cuba. They aided the famous anti-colonial fighter, José Martí, after he assured them that independence for Cuba would bring social reforms for workers. In 1891, the Spanish overlords banned the Alliance, shut down the anarchist press and imprisoned or deported many key activists. But the anarchists' politics remained those of social revolution, not nationalism. When the final War of Independence exploded in 1895, anarchists in Cuba and in exile were in the forefront of this struggle. For example, the anarchist Armando André was a commander in the rebel army. Although the war ended with Spain's defeat in 1898 (due in part to the intervention of the imperialist USA), Martí's promised reforms died with him in battle in 1895. Mass struggle thus continued under the independent Cuban government. The new government did not meet the workers' demands. The local elite had hijacked the anti-colonial struggle. It repressed the workers and anarchists who had sacrificed themselves for independence. This clearly bears out Bakunin's warning: only the working people can make the revolution against imperialism.

The Mexican Revolution of 1910-1922 and the work of Mexican anarchist militants like Ricardo Flores Magon had a profound effect on the workers of Cuba. In 1915, a radical *Peasant Federation of Cuba* (FCC) was formed and for the next 12 years, anarchist fought vigorously against US capitalist interests in Cuba. At least nine anarchist newspapers were in publication at the time.

THE CUBAN REVOLUTION 1952-1959

Because Russia had played an important role in aiding the Allies - after breaking their pact with the Nazis - in World War Two and could supply both diplomatic and material aid to national liberation movements in the Third World and left-wing parties elsewhere, the popularity of the Communist Parties grew. This further weakened anarchism. The Communist Parties and the reformist parliamentary social democrats came to dominate the socialist movement. In Cuba, for example, former army sergeant Fulgencio Batista, who had ruled the island through a series of puppet presidents since his junta's 1933 coup, signed a pact in 1939 with the communist *People's Socialist Party* (PSP) and the communists co-operated clandestinely with

the Batista regime from then on. Batista allowed the PSP to take the reins of the state-controlled *Cuban Confederation of Labour* (CTC2) and in turn the communists guaranteed Batista labour peace. In the same period, the anarcho-syndicalist *General Confederation of Labour* (CGT) had been declared illegal, driven underground and virtually crushed. Finally, in 1943, PSP leader Juan Morinello and fellow PSP members Carlos Rafael Rodríguez and Blas Roca (Francisco Caldero), the party secretary, entered Batista's government. But the following year, Batista lost the elections and retired to an estate in Florida, USA, with millions he had stolen from the treasury. In 1947, the Ramon Grau government, under US pressure, expelled the communist leaders from the CTC2 and, in a strange twist of fate, anarchists filled the vacuum, leading the transport, food and construction unions within the confederation. Given the historical ties between the Spanish and Cuban anarchist movements, this is even more remarkable - that the Cuban movement actually grew in strength in the years following the collapse of the Spanish Revolution.

In 1950, a third national anarchist congress was held in Cuba by militants of the *Libertarian Association of Cuba* (ALC) and the CGT to reorient and revitalise the libertarian movement.

The congress resolved to fight for the independence from class collaborationism of the labour movement, to support the CGT against the CTC2 and its alliance of bosses and the state, to participate directly in the daily struggles of the working class and to educate workers on technical, syndicalist and revolutionary matters. In the 1950s, the ALC had sections in all Cuban provinces - La Habana, Pinar del Rio, Matanzas, Las Villas, Camaguey and Oriente - with wide influence in both the cities and in the rural areas, among industrial workers and plantation workers, miners and craft workers, fishermen and journalists, dockers and transport workers.

In March 1952, Batista staged a comeback coup against which only the ALC and CGT fought. Other sections of the working class movement were so servile by then, that it was an easy victory for Batista. Anarchist militants of the ALC fought against Batista on the side of the workers, running clandestine radio stations, an urban underground and a secret paper *El Libertario* (Liberty), which had formerly been named *Solidaridad* (Solidarity). Numbered among the anarchist and anarchist-influenced insurrectionary organisations were the *Revolutionary Directorate* (DR), *Revolutionary Worker* (OR) and the *Federation of University Students* (FEU).

Batista's thugs raided union halls, jailed and tortured militants and eventually provoked a widespread insurrection against his regime. Among the new opponents was the *26th of July Movement* (MJ26), named after the failed attack on the Moncada Barracks in 1953, in which some anarchists had participated.

The MJ26 included a mixture of constitutional republicans and social or political revolutionaries united by a desire for a modernised Cuba free of US influence. It's founder was Fidel Castro, a lawyer and former *Orthodox Party* (PO) activist who had become affiliated to the *Revolutionary Insurreccional Union* (SIR) of which many anarchists were members. On Batista's return, at the insistence of the US that had by then entered its Cold War against the USSR, he excluded the communists from government. Still, because of its pro-Batista stance between 1933 and 1944, the